

Shalom AZ Ministries

In Pursuit of Israel's Redemption



“‘Working Out’ Your Salvation—What Does that Mean?”

Rabbi Cosmo Panzetta

Devotion and Discussion Questions

Key Texts (TLV): Phil. 2:12-13; 1:27-29; 2:1-11, 1:27-30; Is. 45:18-25; Mt. 23:11-12; John 15:18-21.

There are some passages we have heard so many times that we almost stop hearing what they actually say. “*Work out your salvation with fear and trembling*” is one of those passages. If salvation is by grace and not by works, then what in the world does Paul mean when he tells us to “work out” our salvation? In English, the phrase almost gives us a helpful picture. When we “work out,” we exercise something. We are not creating something from nothing; we are putting something to work. We are exercising it, developing it, and allowing what is already there to show itself. In a similar way, Paul is not telling the Philippians to earn their salvation. He is telling them to live out—to exercise—the salvation God has already graced them with.

And we cannot miss the first word of verse 12: “*Therefore*.” Paul has just taken us through this incredible description of Messiah Yeshua—the One who did not grasp at His equality with God, but emptied Himself, took the form of a servant, humbled Himself, and became obedient even to death on a cross. Then God super-exalted Him and gave Him the Name above every name. The grandeur of Phil. 2:5-11 can almost cause us to miss why Paul gave it to us in the first place. Yeshua is not merely the subject of magnificent theology; He is the paradigm for our lives. “*Have this attitude in yourselves, which also was in Messiah Yeshua*” (Phil. 2:5). Seeing who He is and how He lived, Paul now turns to us and essentially asks, “How then should we live?”

1. “THEREFORE”: LET THE MIND OF MESSIAH BECOME THE PATTERN OF YOUR LIFE

Paul writes, “*Therefore, my loved ones, just as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now even more in my absence...*” (Phil. 2:12). His concern is obedience, but not the kind of obedience that performs because someone important is watching. Paul says, in effect, “Whether I am there or not, this is who you are supposed to be.” Faith in Messiah ultimately expresses itself as obedience to Messiah, not merely in the sense of keeping religious rules, but in being completely devoted to Him. Paul had already told them to live out their heavenly citizenship “*in a manner worthy of the Good News of the Messiah*” whether he was present or absent (Phil. 1:27). Now he comes back to the same concern: let the life of Messiah become your life.

That is why the hymn about Yeshua matters so much. Messiah did nothing out of selfish ambition or the pursuit of empty, earthly glory. Rather than seeking “empty glory,” He emptied Himself. He put Himself last. “*He humbled Himself—becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*” (Phil. 2:8). That mindset is our paradigm. We have not merely been called to make a verbal confession that we trust Yeshua and believe in the way of the cross; we have been called to live out the life of the cross—the emptying of self. A gospel of grace that leaves obedience behind is not the biblical gospel Paul is proclaiming. Grace does not merely forgive us; by the power of the Holy Spirit, grace transforms us into the likeness of Messiah so that His mind increasingly becomes our mind and His way increasingly becomes our way.

2. “WORK OUT YOUR SALVATION WITH FEAR AND TREMBLING”: LIVE OUT WHAT GOD HAS GIVEN YOU. Paul continues, “...*work out your salvation with fear and trembling*” (Phil. 2:12). The word translated “work out,” *katergazesthe*, carries the idea of accomplishing, carrying out, or bringing something into expression. And importantly, the command is plural—“you all.” Paul is not suddenly shifting into an individualistic message about each person trying to save himself. Salvation is from God. Rather, he is speaking to the believing community: in your relationships with one another, live out the salvation Messiah has graced you with. Exercise it. Demonstrate it. Let the salvation that God has worked in you become visible in the way you live together.

And Paul says this is to be done “*with fear and trembling*.” That does not mean cringing before God, terrified that He is waiting for us to fail. It speaks of reverence, respect, awe—a holy wonder before the God who has saved us. When we look at Phil. 2:6–11 and see the Lord of Glory emptying Himself, taking the lowest place, serving, suffering, and giving Himself for us, we realize that living out His way is not some peripheral matter we can take or leave. It’s central. And practical. Paul immediately shows how relational the command is: “*Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you might be blameless and innocent, children of God in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation. Among them you shine as lights in the world*” (Phil. 2:14–15). In a world characterized by grasping, self-promotion, arguing, and “me first,” people who genuinely live the self-emptying way of Yeshua stand out like lights against a dark sky.

3. “FOR GOD IS WORKING IN YOU”: HE GIVES BOTH THE DESIRE AND THE POWER

Paul immediately makes sure we do not misunderstand him: “*For the One working in you is God—both to will and to work for His good pleasure*” (Phil. 2:13). We are indeed to “work it out,” but we can do that because God Himself is already at work in us and among us. The word Paul uses for God’s working, *energōn*, is where we get the idea of “energy.” God is the One energizing His people. He is supplying the working power. He is not doing our obedience for us, but neither does He command us to live His way and then simply sit back waiting for us to fail. The Lord is a loving Father who corrects because He desires understanding, growth, maturity, and transformation. He is actively working in His people because living out His way is beautiful and pleasing to Him.

And notice that God works in us “*both to will and to work*.” He is concerned with both our desires and our actions. It is not enough simply to say, “Well, I wanted to do what was right. My intentions were good.” Paul understood that struggle: “*For to will is present in me, but to do the good is not*” (Rom. 7:18). But life in the Spirit is different. God wants to transform what we want and then empower us to actually live it. That is why Paul writes, “*Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect*” (Rom. 12:2). God desires more than reluctant rule-keeping. He wants the mind of Messiah developed in us so that we increasingly desire what He desires and then, by His Spirit, actually walk it out. God’s good pleasure is not selfish or capricious. God is wholly good; what pleases Him is holy, loving, and good for those He loves.

CONCLUSION

So, what does it mean to “work out your salvation”? It does not mean working to get saved. It means living out the salvation God has already graciously given. It means allowing the mind of Messiah to move from something we admire in Yeshua to something increasingly formed within

us. It means working it out in our homes, our congregations, our friendships, our marriages, our disagreements, our disappointments, and the ordinary relationships of everyday life. It means laying down empty glory and learning to empty self. Love is not taking; love is giving. The way of the world grasps. The way of Messiah gives. The way of the world says, “Me first.” Yeshua, the One who truly was first, willingly put Himself last.

Where is there still a “me first” attitude living in us? Where are we grasping for recognition, position, control, our rights, or our own way? Where have complaining and arguing revealed that the mind of Messiah has not yet taken hold as deeply as it should? Bring that place before Yeshua today. Maybe you genuinely want to change, but you know that wanting alone has not been enough. Then Phil. 2:13 is wonderfully good news: God is at work in you both *to desire* **and** *to do* what pleases Him. Ask Him to change the desire first, and then empower the doing. Lay down the empty glory. Empty self. Take up the life of the cross. And trust that the same God who calls you to walk in the way of Messiah is actively working in you to make that life possible.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is the word “therefore” in Phil. 2:12 so important? How does Phil. 2:5–11 help us understand what “working out” our salvation should look like?
2. How does knowing that “*work out your salvation*” is addressed to the community—not merely isolated individuals—change the way you understand this passage?
3. What is the difference between living before God with “fear and trembling” and living in fear that God is simply waiting for you to fail?
4. Where in your life right now are you most tempted toward a “me first” attitude—at home, at work, in ministry, in relationships, or even online? What would the self-emptying way of Yeshua look like there?
5. Is there an area where you genuinely desire to obey God but continue struggling to actually do it? How might Phil. 2:13 change the way you pray and depend upon the Ruach ha-Kodesh in that area?

CLOSING PRAYER

ADONAI, thank You that our salvation is Your work and Your gift of grace. Thank You for Messiah Yeshua, who showed us what You are truly like by humbling Himself, taking the place of a servant, and giving Himself in sacrificial love. Forgive us for the places where we still pursue empty glory, cling to our own rights, put ourselves first, complain, argue, or seek our own interests above the interests of others.

Spirit of God, form the mind of Messiah within us. Transform not only what we do, but what we desire. Work in us and among us both to will and to work for Your good pleasure. Teach us to live out the salvation You have given us with holy awe and gratitude, so that our lives together shine as lights in this world and point people to Yeshua. May we not merely confess the way of the cross, but live the way of the cross.

B'Shem Yeshua, In the name of Yeshua, amen.